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THE CHURCHILL RIVER*

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Of the many rivers that flow into Hudson Bay, the second largest in size and one of the most interesting from a historical and geographical point of view is the Churchill. Discovered in 1619, it was used for over one hundred years as a trading route of the Hudson's Bay Company from their fort at its mouth to the interior. In the year 1821, however, it was abandoned so completely that, for a portion of its lower course, no information was available until it was mapped by the writer in 1915.

In many respects it is a river typical of the great northern interior portion of Canada, a river of rapids, falls, narrow chutes, broad lake expansions dotted with islands, and long, placid stretches of smooth water, a stream for travel by canoe only. Its length is approximately one thousand miles, and its basin occupies 115,500 square miles, an area greater than that of Italy and almost as large as that of Great Britain and Ireland. To the south of it is an area of 4,000 square miles at present a complete blank on the map, while to the north of it lies a region covering 73,000 square miles, totally unexplored by white men. The upper portion of its basin is much better known; it is more easily accessible, and as a result more survey work has been done there.

Early History and Exploration

The history of the region begins with the discovery of Hudson Bay. In 1610 Henry Hudson entered the bay and sailed its entire length to the head of James Bay. In the following year occurred his tragic death after being marooned in an open boat by his mutinous sailors. In 1612 Sir Thomas Button sailed along the west coast of Hudson Bay in search of a northwest passage to China and in vain hopes of finding some trace of Hudson. Button wintered at the mouth of the Nelson River and in the following spring sailed north along the coast past Cape Churchill. It remained, however, for a seaman of another nationality to discover the Churchill River and the best harbor on the west coast of Hudson Bay.

In the autumn of 1619, Jens Munck, a Danish sea-captain, sailed across Hudson Bay in search of the much-desired northwest passage, with two vessels, a war ship named the *Unicorn* and a small sloop, the *Lamprey*. Driven by a heavy gale Munck came to an opening between breakers on a rock-bound shore. He had discovered the large natural harbor of Churchill.

Munck spent the winter there. In preparation for it, an ice-break was made around the keels of his vessels, great quantities of wood were collected

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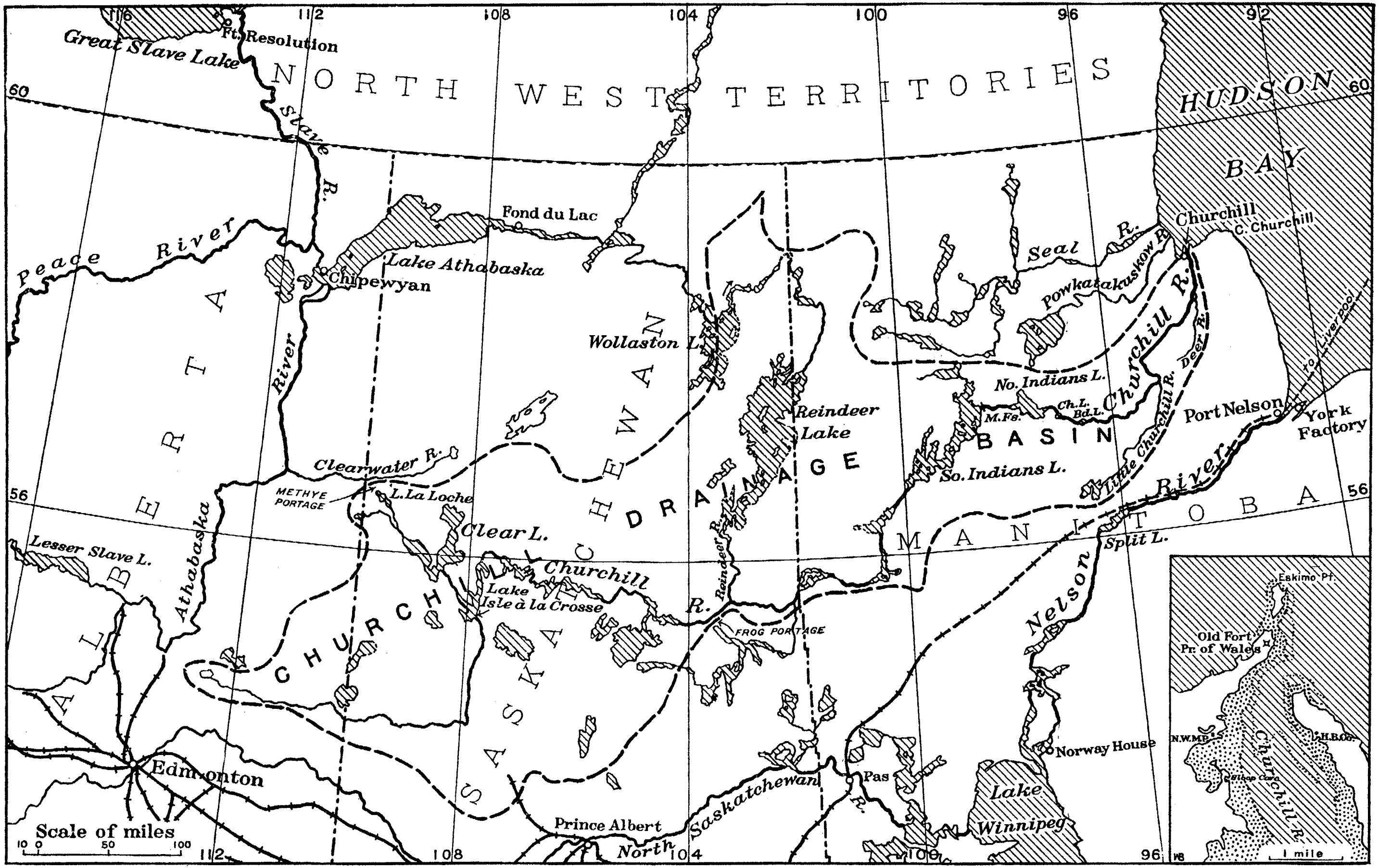

Sketch-map showing the drainage basin of the Churchill River. Scale, 1:8,100,000. Based on the base map of Canada, 1:6,336,000, published by the Department of the Interior, Ottawa. *Abbreviations:* Ch. L., Churchill Lake; Bd. L., Billard Lake; M. Fs., Mission Falls. *Note:* The route of the Hudson Bay railroad between Pas and the lower Nelson River in 95° W. is incorrectly shown. It should parallel the line, as here indicated, on its southeastern side at an average distance of about 25 miles and cross the Nelson River at Manitou Rapids, about 20 miles above Split Lake, and at Kettle Rapids (95° W.).

The inset, 1:160.000, based on Chart 401 of the Department of the Naval Service of Canada, shows Churchill harbor and the mouth of the river.

from the forests which at that time extended to the water's edge, and rough fire-places made of rocks were built on the decks of his two vessels. The winter was a terrible one to the sailors unaccustomed to such a severe climate and to the best methods of protecting themselves against it. Through exposure and scurvy, one after another of the crew perished, until in June only Munck himself and two of his men survived. When the ice finally went out in the spring the three men succeeded in getting the smaller of the two ships, the *Lamprey,* afloat and in it sailed to Denmark. Before leaving, however, Munck bored holes in the hull of the *Unicorn* and sank her with all her freight, with the intention of returning later to rescue her. On reaching Denmark, however, the outbreak of war in Europe demanded Munck's services for his sovereign in another field and he made no more journeys to Hudson Bay.

The *Unicorn,* however, did not remain long undisturbed. On descending the river, Indians discovered it with the bodies and clothing of a race which they had never before seen. While they were plundering the vessel, the gunpowder on board was exploded and ship and Indians alike were destroyed. Some eighty years later a brass cannon with the stamp C4—Christian IV—was dug up from the river flats of Churchill harbor, which proved conclusively that here was the location of Munck's winter quarters. The Cree name for the Churchill River dates from Munck's visit. It is still called by them the ''Mistayseebee,'' or Great-River-of-the-Strangers.

With the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670, trading posts were soon built on Hudson Bay, the first five forts being at Albany River, Hayes Island, Ruperts River, Port Nelson, and New Severn. In the year 1686 a Captain Abraham sailed north from Port Nelson and established a post at the mouth of the Churchill River, naming it after the newly appointed governor of the company, Lord Churchill, afterwards first Duke of Marlborough. In 1718 a wooden fort was built on the river about five miles from its mouth on the site of the trading-post occupied at present by the company. This fort, to which was given the name Fort Prince of Wales, did not remain long in use, however. In 1694 a French fleet under the command of the noted admiral Iberville had sailed into Hudson Bay and captured Port Nelson. When the territory was restored to the English in 1713 by the Treaty of Utrecht, a strong sentiment arose in favor of strengthening all the company's forts. This finally culminated in the building of a new stone Fort Prince of Wales on Eskimo Point at the mouth of the Churchill River to serve as a protection for the company's best harbor.

The new fort was begun in 1736 and finished in 1771. It was designed by military engineers who had served under Marlborough, and at the time of its completion was the strongest fort in North America, its walls surpassing in strength even those of Quebec. According to the original plans its walls were to have been 42 feet thick, but owing to the objection of the governor they were first built with a thickness of but 25 feet. It was after-

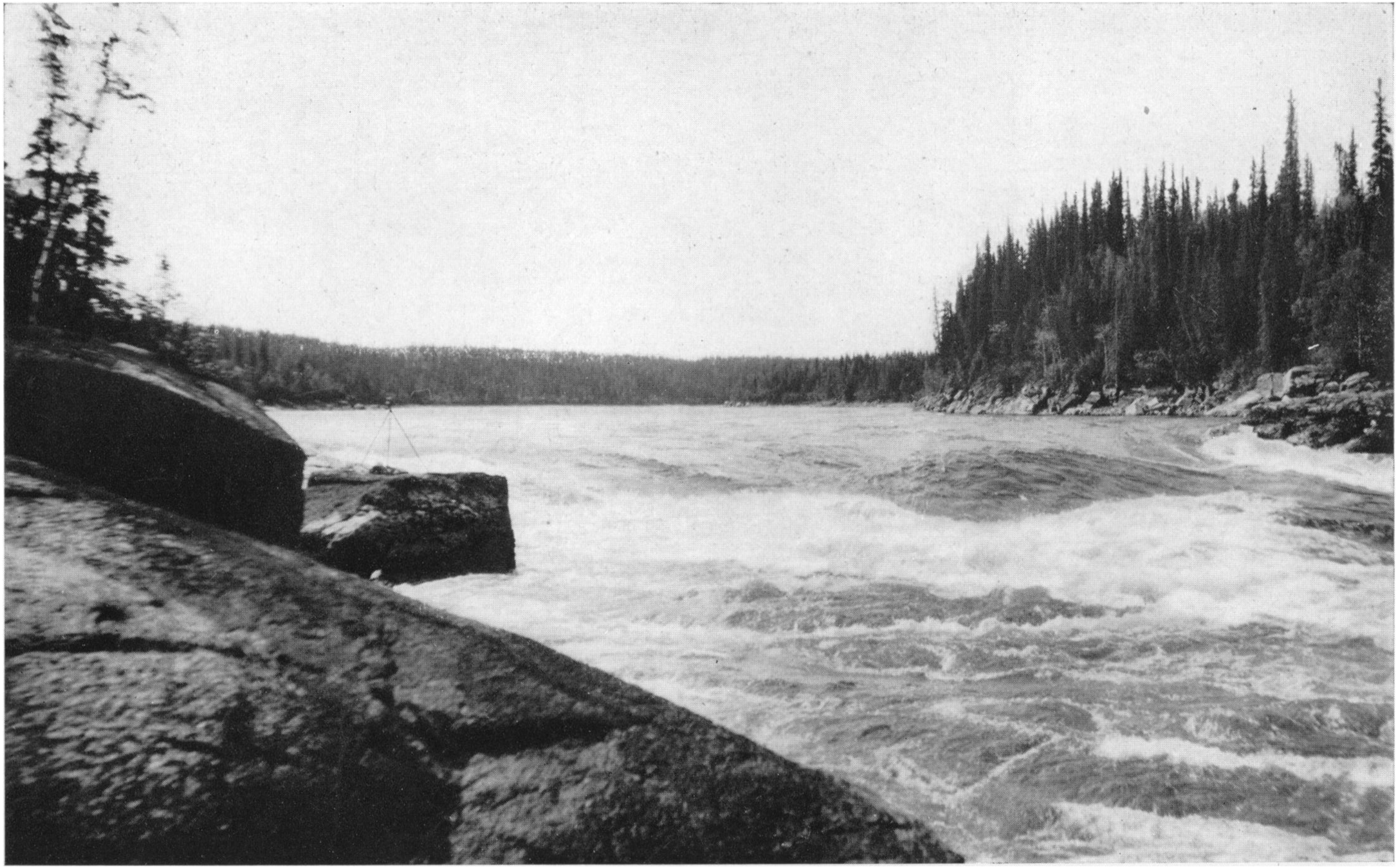

FIG. 2—Churchill River: A chute 13 miles below Churchill Lake. (Figs. 2 to 11 inclusive are from photos of the Geological Survey of Canada.)

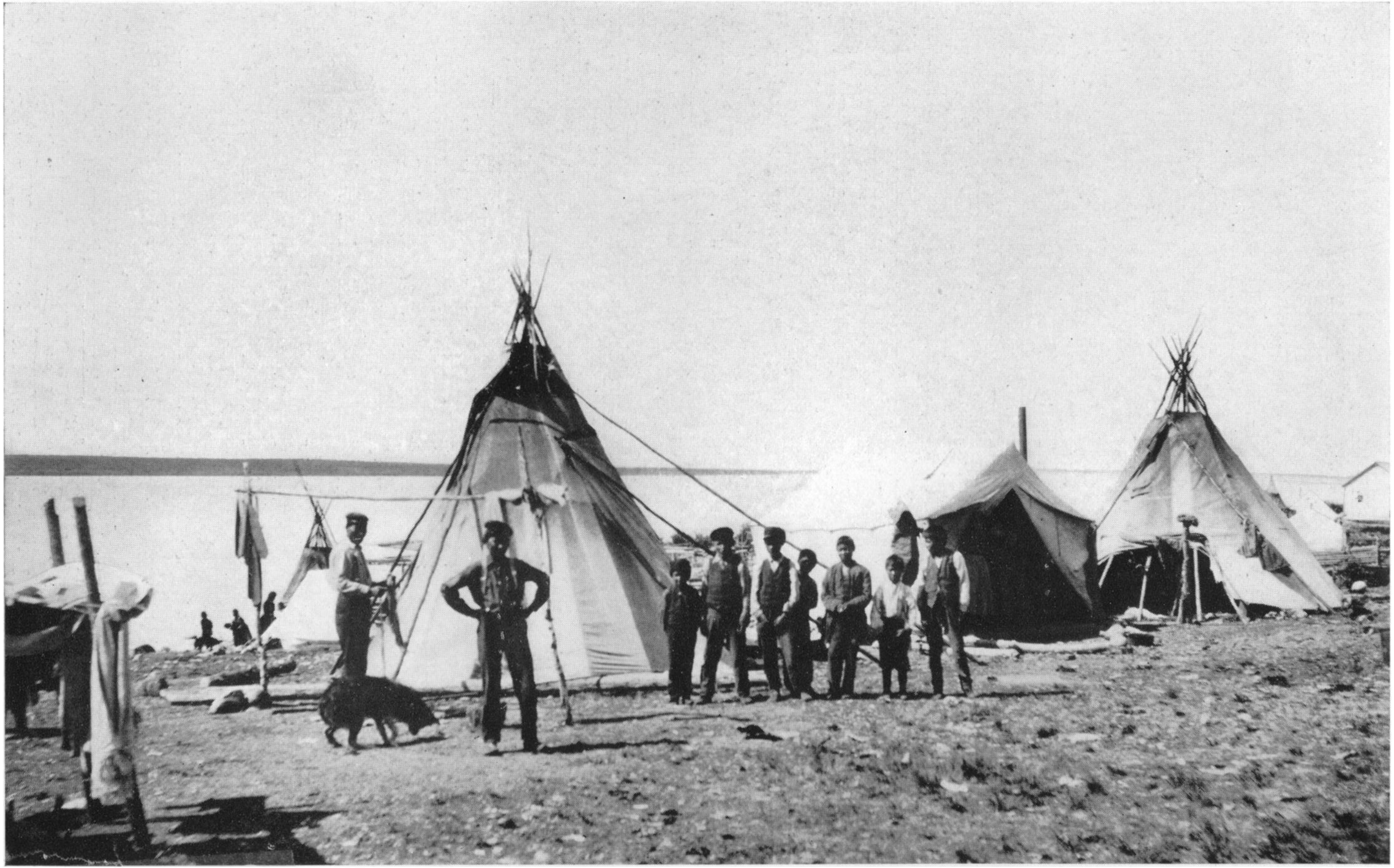

FIG. 3—Chipewyan Indians and their tepees at Fond du Lac on Lake Athabaska.

wards found, however, that the walls had a tendency to sink when heavy guns were fired on them, so one section was pulled down and rebuilt according to the original specifications. The armament consisted of forty guns varying from six to twenty-four pounders. It was from this fort that Samuel Hearne started on his famous overland journeys in 1769-1770, in the course of which he discovered the Coppermine River and Great Slave Lake. These expeditions were most important from the fact that they were the first attempt on the part of the Hudson's Bay Company to explore the country inland. Hitherto they had never ventured away from the coast at Churchill, depending on the Indians to come to them to trade. Hearne's work marks the beginning of a new era for the company and for the country.

Hearne's name is also associated with that of Fort Prince of Wales in connection with the most striking event of its history. As a reward for his services in carrying his explorations to the Coppermine River, Hearne was appointed governor of the fort, but his rule was destined to be but brief. One afternoon in August, 1772, a French fleet under the command of Admiral de la Pérouse appeared before the fort; its intentions were unsuspected by Hearne, who was totally unaware that France and England were at war. His surprise, therefore, can be imagined when, early in the following morning, he received a summons to surrender from four hundred French soldiers drawn up in front of the fort. The garrison consisted of but thirty-nine men, a totally insufficient number to withstand a siege, and Hearne promptly capitulated. After endeavoring to demolish the thick walls of the fortress, La Pérouse sailed away, taking Hearne with him as a prisoner. When peace was signed in the following year between England and France Hearne was sent back by the Hudson's Bay Company to take charge again at Churchill. He did not attempt to occupy the fort again, however, but established his residence five miles up from the fort on the site of the original trading-post of the company, where wood and fresh water were more available. The old abandoned fort stands today in practically the same condition in which the French left it. Another interesting reminder of Hearne may also still be seen today at Churchill. On the smoothly glaciated rock surface of what is known as Sloop Cove, so called from the fact that two of the company's vessels, the *Furnace* and the *Discovery,* spent the winter of 1741-1742 there, may be found carved the names of a number of men, some in letters seven feet in length. Among them is the following: "Sl. Hearne, July Ye 1, 1767," undoubtedly carved by himself with chisel and hammer.

Of the early exploration of the Churchill River very little is known. The old map of the portion of the river from its mouth up to Isle à la Crosse is supposed to have been made by Peter Fidler, an early pioneer trader and explorer, who acted as a surveyor for the Hudson's Bay Company. It is thought that Fidler spent the winter of 1808-1809 at Fort Churchill and in the summer of 1809 made his track survey of the river. It is also highly probable that the years 1809-1811 were spent by him in continuing his surveys on the Powkatakuskow and Seal Rivers to the north in the effort to find some easier route than the Churchill to the upper portion of the river and to the Athabaska region, but evidently no such route was discovered.

It is unfortunate that we do not know more about the life and work of this explorer. In many respects he was a most interesting and remarkable character.[1] He was a man of good physique, a hard worker and an equally hard drinker, a great reader and student, but of an irritable disposition, with little consideration for others. He himself tells of passing, while on one of his long canoe trips, a fellow surveyor, David Thompson, without either stopping or speaking, and from what is known of Thompson's character it is highly probable that the lack of friendliness shown on this chance meeting in the wilderness was due to Fidler. His will is a further illustration of the eccentric character of the man. After bequeathing a number of legacies, he directed the balance of his estate to be placed in the public funds and to be allowed to accumulate until August 16, 1969, the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth; the heir of his youngest son, Peter Fidler, was then to receive the accumulated amount.

After the union of the North-West Company with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, which followed a long period of rivalry for the trade of the interior, the lower part of the Churchill River was completely abandoned as a trading route. In its place the Saskatchewan River, which had long been used by the North-West Company, now became the important route to the upper Churchill country and the Athabaska region. Since that time the lower Churchill has been descended but a very few times. The Chipewyan Indians who trade at Fort Churchill travel overland, making most of their journeys with dogs in winter. The river is also avoided by the Cree Indians of Split Lake on the Nelson River, who occasionally make trips to Fort Churchill over a portage route leading to the Little Churchill River. The latter is followed to its junction with the main Churchill; three miles below where they unite the latter is left and a portage route followed to the Deer River, a much smaller stream flowing parallel to the Churchill and entering it about twenty-two miles above its mouth. This route is a difficult one to follow, especially in midsummer, when the water of the Deer is so low that almost continuous portaging is necessary. In spite of this fact, however, the Indians invariably use it rather than descend the "Great River of the Strangers," of which they stand in great dread. In 1915 the writer received many warnings from well-meaning Indians at Split Lake as to what would befall if an attempt should be made to go down the main river, but as will be shown later it proved to be an excellent stream to descend.

The country drained by the Churchill River is typical of the physiographic province to which the name Laurentian Plateau is applied, a region

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[1] J. B. Tyrrell: Peter Fidler, Trader and Surveyor, 1769 to 1822, *Proc. and Trans. Royal Soc. of Canada*, 3rd Series, Vol. 7, 1913, Section 2, pp. 117-127.

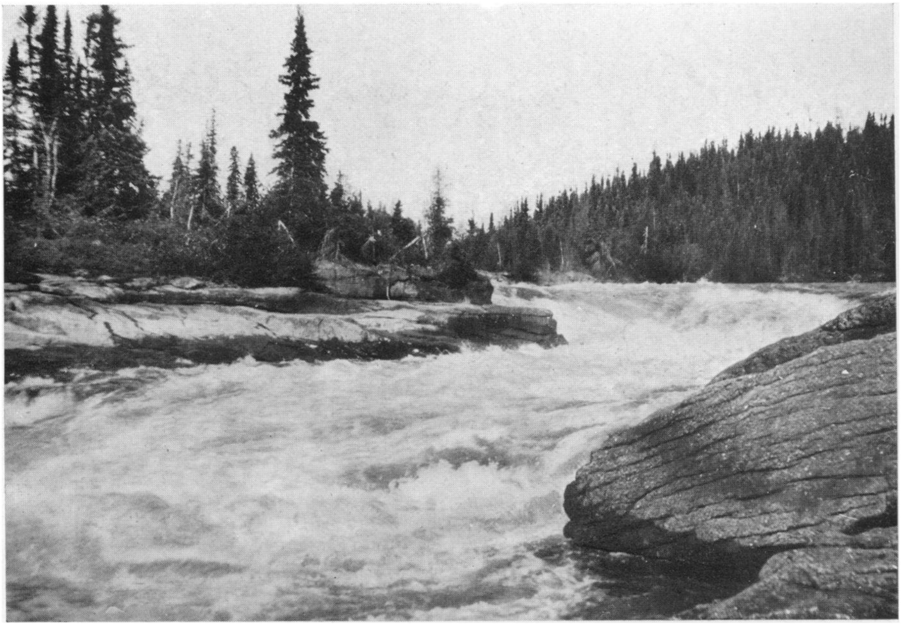

FIG. 4.

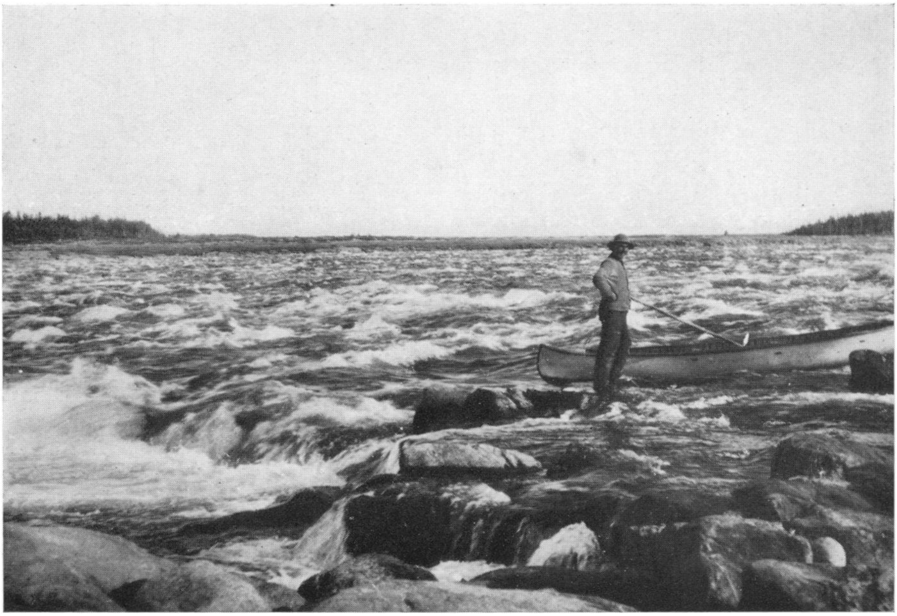

FIG. 5.

FIG. 4—A gorge on the Churchill River.

FIG. 5—Typical rapids on the Churchill River.

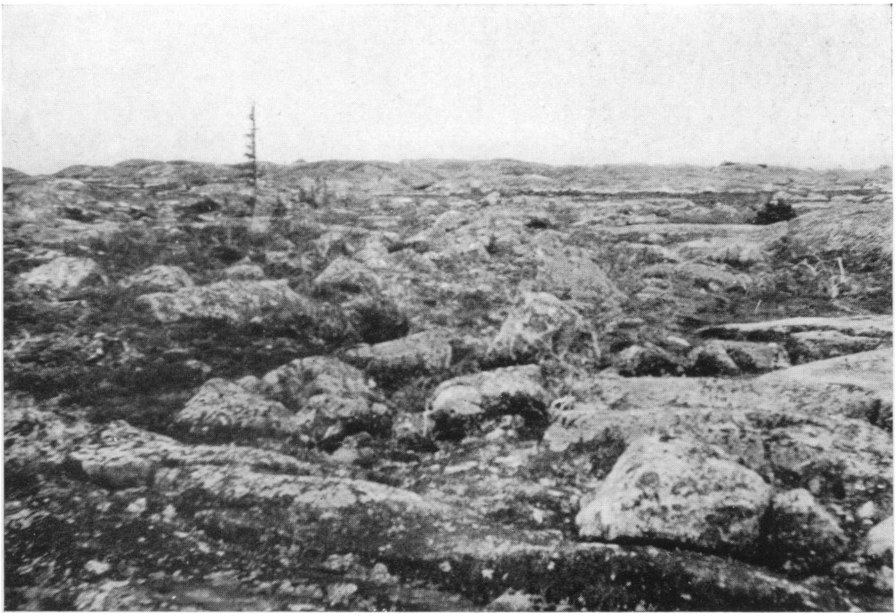

FIG. 6.

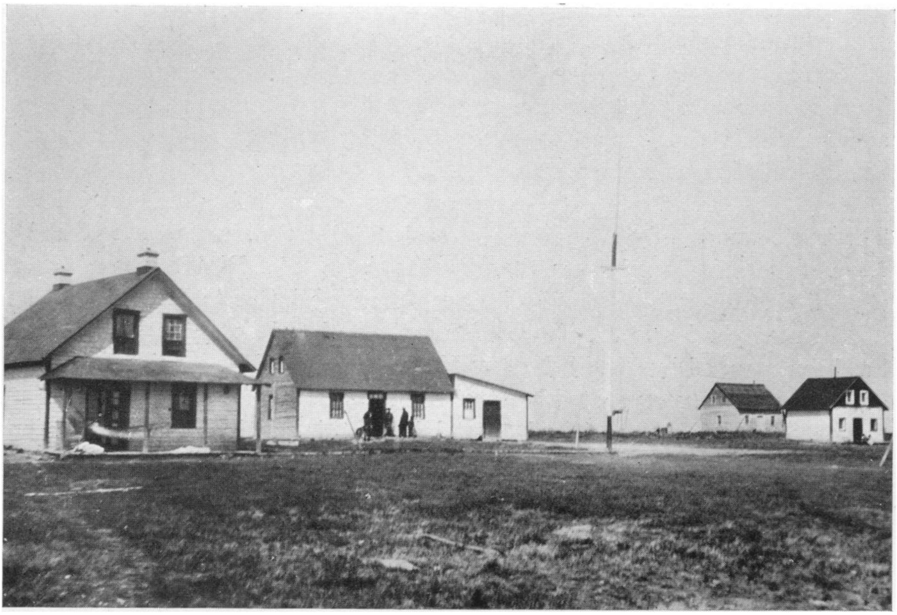

FIG. 7.

FIG. 6—Barren Ground topography near Fort Churchill.

FIG. 7—Hudson's Bay Company post at Split Lake, Nelson River.

of pre-Cambrian rocks, mainly granites and gneisses, covering an area of over a million square miles in the form of a letter V surrounding Hudson Bay. Its most striking feature is the remarkable regularity over so great an area. There are no high elevations; the general level of the interstream areas is seldom more than 200 feet above the level of the streams; those that do rise even but slightly above this height stand out as prominent hills. The surface is very uneven and hummocky, consisting of hollows and ridges, the former usually occupied by lakes or muskeg and the latter frequently having precipitous sides. Residual soil is almost entirely lacking. The drainage is highly disorganized. Lakes are numerous; streams expand and contract along their course, and rapids and falls are characteristic features. In many places the run-off is undefined by channels and spills over rock cliffs.

Modern Exploration, and Description of the River

The upper portions of the Churchill River have been mapped by T. Fawcett, J. B. Tyrrell, and Wm. McInnes; a full description of these parts is given in the reports of the last two.[2] The portion of the river from its headwaters at Lake La Loche to Frog Portage, near which the Churchill is joined from the north by the Reindeer River, was surveyed by Mr. Fawcett in 1888. It had first been ascended by some fur-traders from Montreal who afterwards combined to form the North-West Company and was regularly used as a trading route for many years to the Athabaska and Mackenzie River country. It contains numerous lakes separated by stretches of swift water containing falls and rapids, one of which, Snake Rapids, is over 1½ miles in length. The two largest lakes on this portion of the river are Clear Lake and Lake Isle à la Crosse, each over 35 miles in length. The chief disadvantage of this as a route to the Athabaska River is the famous Methye Portage, 12¼ miles in length, from Lake La Loche to the Clearwater River. The route was finally abandoned when, with the building of a railroad to Edmonton and a road from there to the Athabaska River, it was demonstrated that scows could safely be run down the latter to Lake Athabaska.

The next portion of the river as far as the outlet of Southern Indians Lake has been mapped by Mr. McInnes. Here again the river consists of a chain of lake expansions separated by stretches of swift water, in which numerous portages are necessary. The largest lake in this portion and indeed along the entire course of the river is Southern Indians Lake. It is 92 miles long and has a width of 15 miles at its broadest part. It contains many islands, and its shore-line is very irregular. On the early maps prepared from the track surveys of Peter Fidler the bays were united to form a lake with something corresponding to the true outline but showing an area much greater than it actually possesses. In fact the lake nowhere shows any great expanse of water.

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[2] J. B. Tyrrell and D. B. Dowling: Report on the Country between Athabaska Lake and Churchill River, *Ann. Rept. Geol. Survey of Canada*, Vol. 8 for 1895, Report D, 1896.

William McInnes: The Basins of the Nelson and Churchill Rivers, *Geol. Survey of Canada Memoir No. 30*, 1913.

The remainder of the river from Southern Indians Lake to Hudson Bay was the portion mapped during the summer of 1915. Access to the river was obtained from Split Lake on the Nelson River, over the portage route to the Little Churchill. From the mouth of the latter, the main Churchill was ascended to Southern Indians Lake. At only one or two places in this distance was any indication found that the river had formerly been used as a canoe route. A Hudson Bay axe-head at one place, an old cabin on Billard Lake, and some cuttings near Southern Indians Lake were the only signs of man which were discovered. For the numerous rapids and falls on this portion of the river there were, with but one exception, no signs whatever of any portage trails. The river in this distance is marked by three lake expansions, Northern Indians, Churchill, and Billard Lakes, several long, wide stretches of smooth water, and elsewhere by narrow swift reaches. In the latter are included four narrow chutes where the river contracts to a width of from 100 to 200 feet and plunges down between rock walls, five falls varying from 8 to 20 feet in vertical drop, numerous rapids necessitating portages, and stretches of swift water where pole and tracking line were continually in use.

Thirty miles below the mouth of the Little Churchill the granite-gneiss of the region disappears under a covering of horizontal Trenton limestone through which the river has cut its course. At places for a distance of 27 miles the river is bordered on either side by vertical and overhanging walls 60 feet in height. The current here is swift, but no rapids are encountered which cannot easily be run. It is probably this portion of the river which has given it such a bad reputation among the natives of the region. In the spring and early summer ice-jams undoubtedly occur in this part of the river and make it a dangerous portion to venture upon, but when descended late in August only a few patches of ice remained on the limestone cliffs. For late summer the Churchill is therefore much to be preferred to the Deer River route for a canoe journey to Fort Churchill.

The last stretch of the river flows in a northerly direction, and an interesting feature to observe is the change in vegetation as one proceeds from the wooded belt into the Barren Ground region; the trees become gradually smaller and fewer in number until at Churchill itself trees are practically absent.

In the last 20 miles the river is wide and shallow and contains many islands. The highest point affected by the tide is 12 miles above its mouth. Below this point the estuary has a width of 3 miles, bordered on either side by a ridge of quartzite. The Hudson's Bay Company post of Churchill and the Anglican mission are situated 5 miles from the mouth of the river on an old beach along the north shore of the estuary. Near the mouth of the river not far from old Fort Prince of Wales is situated the barracks of the North

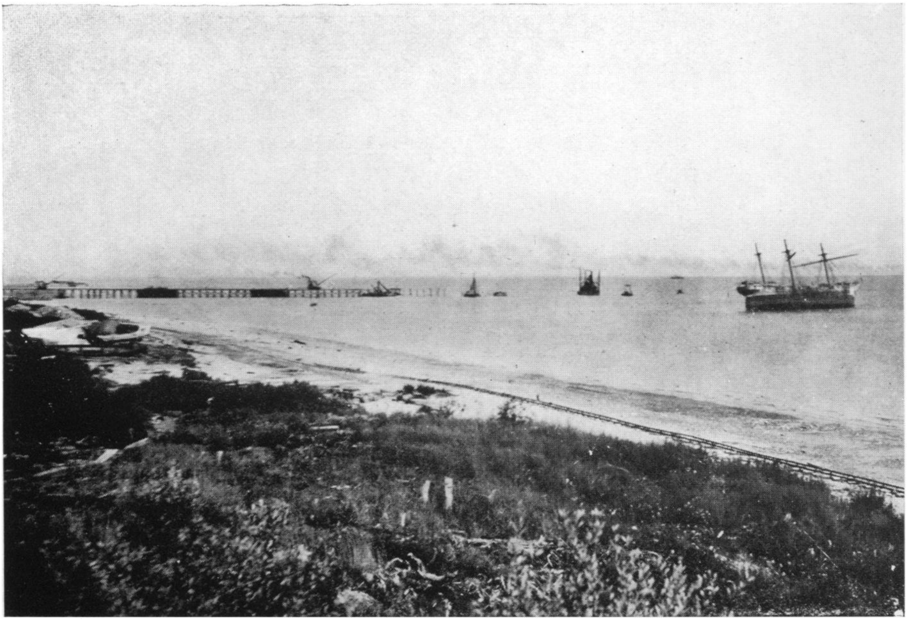

Fig. 8.

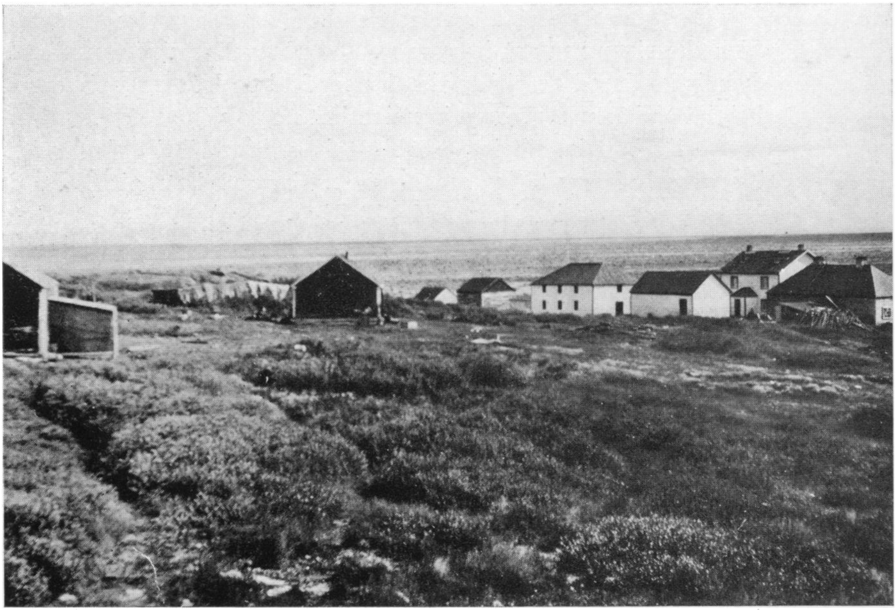

Fig. 9.

Fig. 8—Port Nelson, September, 1915. When the railroad now under construction is completed, Port Nelson will become an important outlet for the shipment of wheat from western Canada to Europe via Hudson Bay.

Fig. 9—Hudson's Bay Company post of Fort Churchill.

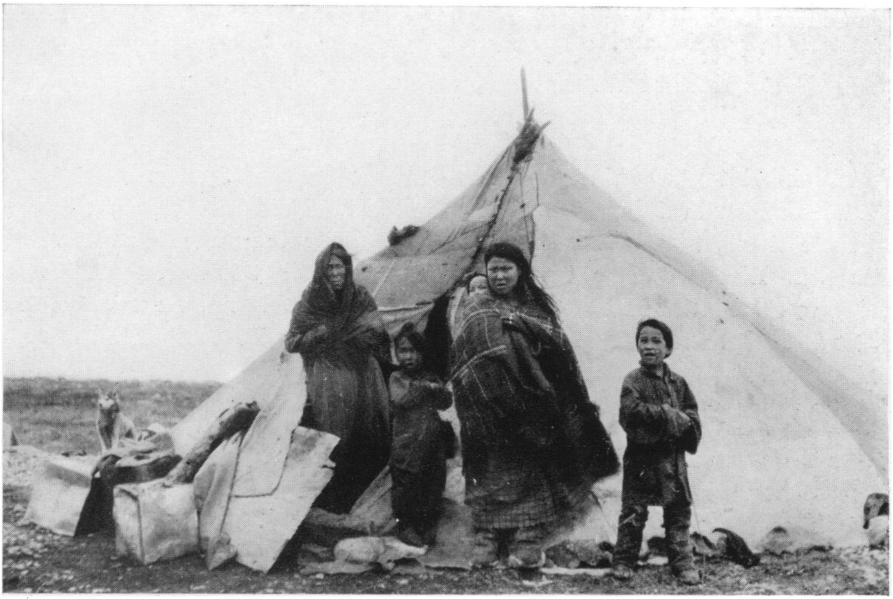

FIG. 10

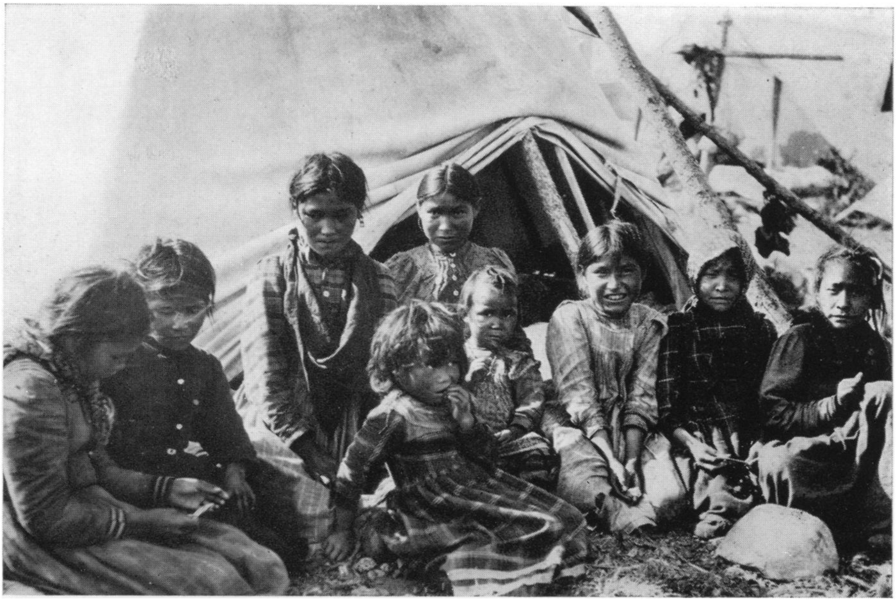

FIG. 11.

FIG. 10—Eskimos at their summer camp near Fort Prince of Wales.

FIG. 11—Chipewyan girls at Fond du Lac, Lake Athabaska.

West Mounted Police, while directly opposite is the large warehouse of the company. On the extremity of Eskimo Point at the mouth of the river still stands Fort Prince of Wales, with its dismantled parapets and guns.

Inhabitants of the Region

The inhabitants of the region consist of a few wandering Indians and a small number of Eskimos living on the coast. The Indians belong to two separate tribes, the Crees and the Chipewyans, and in a general way the Churchill River forms a boundary between their territories, the Crees living to the south and the Chipewyans to the north. All those who come to trade at Split Lake are Crees, those that come to Fort Churchill are all Chipewyans.

The Chipewyans belong to the great Déné stock, a name given to a group of tribes with linguistic similarities who occupy all the interior country west of Hudson Bay from the Athabaska River north to the region occupied by the Eskimos, and across the Rocky Mountains almost to the Pacific Ocean. A further idea of the wide distribution of this stock may be gained from the fact that the Navajos of Arizona, the Apaches of the plains, and the Hupas of California belong to the same branch. The Canadian tribes included among the Dénés are nine in number, of which the more important are the Chipewyans, the Dogribs, living between Great Slave Lake and Great Bear Lake, and the Yellow-knives, living northeast of Great Slave Lake.

The main region occupied by the Chipewyans is north of Lake Athabaska, and many more come to the trading posts of Fond du Lac and Chipewyan on that lake than to Fort Churchill. The writer has spent two seasons in the region north of Lake Athabaska and found it rather interesting to compare the habits of those at Churchill with those in the more typical region and to note the effect of environment on their mode of living. North of Lake Athabaska travel is by canoe over the numerous lakes and small streams. Three times a year the natives assemble at the trading posts, at Christmas, when they come in for religious service at the mission, again at Easter, and in June for treaty. The latter is an important occasion for the Indians. Every year the government pays each man, woman, and child five dollars in consideration for having taken over the country from them. The Indians never fail to assemble; and while they remain, the trading posts, with all the additional tepees, the great numbers of dogs, and the excitement of dancing and gambling, present a much more animated appearance than under ordinary conditions. The Indians remain until their treaty money is spent and the provisions which they have purchased with it are used up, and then they set out again in their canoes for their hunting and fishing grounds. The birch-bark canoe is still the type most in use, although many of the Indians now have wooden Peterborough canoes, purchased from the traders. The old-fashioned birch-bark possesses the advantage of extreme lightness, an important consideration on journeys where long portages are an everyday occurrence. The type of dwelling used is the round tepee with its fire in the center. Instead of skins, however, canvas purchased from the stores is now generally used. Along their routes of travel skeleton tepees made of poles are a common sight; these can quickly be converted into a permanent camp by throwing the canvas around them. The diet of the Indians is almost entirely fish and meat. When they leave for their hunting trips they take with them a little flour and tea, but the former is soon consumed. Tobacco and ammunition are considered much more valuable cargo where bulk and weight must be kept at a minimum and where the women and even the small children are smokers. Ready-made clothing is now used almost altogether, but the universal footwear used among them is still the moccasin.

The Chipewyans who come to Fort Churchill number about one hundred and seventy. They remain all summer at the port fishing and hunting. Very few of them own canoes, since their method of travel, unlike that of the Indians of Lake Athabaska, is overland rather than along the streams; otherwise their customs and manner of living are much the same. In the fall, usually late in September, they all start for their hunting grounds with packs on their backs and their dogs loaded with as much as they can carry. Some of them travel as far as Reindeer and Shethnanei Lakes. Generally about three weeks before Christmas the men return to Fort Churchill by dog-team to trade their furs, leaving their families at their camps, and as a rule one or more trips are made again during the winter. Those who have seen them in their winter quarters say that when the caribou are plentiful they live in comparative comfort and are much at their best. In the spring they return to spend the summer at the fort. Their movements and manner of living are always dependent on the food supply.

During the summer some fifty or sixty Eskimos are always camped at Churchill. They live at the mouth of the river on Eskimo Point near old Fort Prince of Wales. In winter they go north to Chesterfield to hunt the seal and walrus.

FAUNA

Of the animals of the Churchill River region the most important from the point of view of food is the Barren Ground caribou; large herds come south in winter as far as Northern and Southern Indians Lakes and as a rule they come close to Fort Churchill. Farther north on the Dubaunt River herds numbering many thousand animals were encountered by Tyrrell in July. Moose range as far north as the Churchill River. In 1915 one was seen at the extreme north end of Northern Indians Lake. In the same season quite a number of fur-bearing animals were also seen. Many wolves were observed along the river; some sixteen were counted during the summer. Ten black bears were also seen, besides two black foxes, several red and cross foxes, and a number of mink and otter. Of other animals may be mentioned beaver, squirrels, chipmunks, and rabbits. Numerous geese were killed on the lakes and along the river. The large gray goose was particularly abundant. Of ducks the varieties noticed include golden-eyes, sawbills, mallards, and black ducks. Plover are fairly abundant and are eagerly hunted at Fort Churchill. Of fish, pike, goldeyes, doré, whitefish. and suckers are common in the lake expansions. One of the most important industries at Fort Churchill is fishing with huge nets for white whales, cetaceans averaging about 15 feet in length, which are quite abundant near the mouth of the river. Their blubber furnishes the supply of food for the dogs.

VEGETATION

The trees of the region are all small. Black spruce is much the most abundant, but it rarely grows to a diameter exceeding eight inches. Tamarack and low juniper occur sparingly. Of the deciduous trees much the most common is poplar, of which two species, the aspen and the balsam, are found. White birch occurs sparsely, and both red and gray willow occur locally in dense thickets. Fort Churchill itself is on the edge of the Barren Grounds. The ridges of rock on either side are entirely bare except for a growth of moss and a few small trees in the depressions. The supply of wood is always a big problem at the post, and every year it is necessary to go farther for it.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND OUTLOOK

Fort Churchill has but little communication with the outside world. Once a year the steamer *Nascopie* arrives from eastern Canada, bringing in the annual supply of provisions. Its arrival is the event of the year, and the writer was fortunate enough to be present for this event after descending the river. In summer the only other way of reaching Fort Churchill is by the river route from Split Lake. In winter, however, the post may be reached by dog-team either overland from Split Lake or along the coast from Port Nelson. Two winter mails are obtained by the latter route from York Factory and Port Nelson.

There is little hope of the country's having any important future. Agriculture can never be important, and the timber is too small for a lumber industry. From the character of the geology of the region, little can also be hoped for in the way of minerals in the immediate vicinity of the river. The fur trade will probably continue to be the chief asset of the region. Should the new Canadian government railway, now under construction to Port Nelson on Hudson Bay, ever prove to be a valuable outlet to Europe for the grain of western Canada, it is entirely probable that the excellent natural harbor of Churchill will sometime be taken advantage of.